



QUAD
2002

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Quad 2002

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The views expressed in Quad are those of the artists and authors, and are not necessarily those of the staff, faculty advisor, Publications Board, Student Government Association, or administration of Birmingham-Southern College.

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ANNA'S SONG

Susan Duong

When I saw your tiny bones pushing through
paper skin, a Lilliputian mummy too fragile to love,
I thought there must be a mistake. That's not my baby.

Five weeks you lay in a plastic womb,
sunbathing beneath the bili-light. I marveled at
your will to strip off your mask and see the world.

Too weak to nurse, milk from my breasts channels through
clear tubing and into you, three pounds becoming four,
and you earn a space along the wall, closer to home.

I hold you in my arms, small, struggling to breathe,
neither of us understanding; *sepsis*-blood infection.
Spinal cultures. Canulas. Again you lie in a plastic womb.

Your bassinet stands empty beside our bed.
Waking from a nightmare I search the sheets, grasp pillow to my breasts,
but still your bassinet stands empty beside our bed.

Flowers announcing your homecoming wither
on the table, pink blossoms fade, then brown.
No sunlight penetrates the shaded windows.

Now a stranger's blood flows through your veins,
mixing with mine. Red, swollen like a tick,
your rosy cheeks frighten me in their intensity.

IV's prick your body
over and over and over,
good vein gone bad, purpling your skin.

Fourteen months later, I stare at tiny scars
freckling your hands and feet like the
track marks of a heroin addict.

No longer a whisper, you shout
in delight of yourself, and I join in,
singing a mother's song.

A BLUE M&M

Shannon Robinson

The halls of middle school were long,
And shadowed,
Lined with lockers and pictures,
Fears and insecurities.
The number on the locker above mine
Read "67"—
It belonged to Jim.
Goodness ran through him
Like a long and twisting ribbon,
To which I found no end.

But in a trench where shirt labels and shoe brands
Stripped a simple hello,
And character was a wad of gum,
He stood out, like a pigeon in a room full of peacocks.
He was different,
For no other reason than because they decided so.
Meanness lurked through the hallways, the air ducts,
Their veins, my dreams, his nightmares,
Meeting him with empty stares and contempt.
The football player
Forearmed Jim in the gut
Knocking away his breath and self-respect,
And spit right in the middle of his face,
Ridiculing him,
Like a punching bag with a mind of its own.

Then one day,
Before first period
In a crowded gym of watchful eyes,
Three years of burning humiliation overwhelmed him.
He turned around,
Reared back his fist with the strength and pride
Of a saint at Hell's doorway,
And let it go on a face that never saw it coming.
He broke the football player's nose,
And knocked him to a floor that held him there,
Like the ant he was,
While blood soared through the air, dotting white shirts like i's.

DAUGHTERS

Mandy Bradley

I left my dad in New York. He and I don't talk, but I went to visit him. I hadn't seen him in six years. We used to talk on the phone, but even that got to be too much. His health was getting bad. He shook. He would call to ask me what he'd done to make me abandon him. I got caller ID. My husband Robert intercepted Dad's letters, but he went to Minnesota for five days, and wasn't there to capture one of them. I had just finished a swim that day when I found it in the mail.

The handwriting was slanted and broke at sharp angles. The ink fell in thick, stalled pools at random places in the words. Five newspaper clippings were in the envelope: three were annotated baseball reports, one was a story about "The Batboy" from the *Weekly World News*, and one was a list of "Today's Birthdays"—I didn't know anyone on the list. When I had read everything, I reorganized my silverware, then lay on my bed and re-counted all the fleurs-de-lis on my ceiling tiles. I tried to call my brother William and left a message that I knew he wouldn't remember to return. I wanted to sleep.

I decided that the next day at work, I would call Dad. I called from work so that I could talk to him before time to pick up the kids. Dad cried when I told him that it was me. I almost hung up at that point. But we planned for me to visit him in Manhattan. He said he had some of my things—he said it was things from college that I had stored

*I do that often. I worry about my memories.
I gave up Nutra Sweet to protect them.*

there. Robert said that he would come with me, but I didn't want that. The entire situation was mine in its awkwardness and anger and history. I didn't want to have to translate for Robert. I didn't want him to feel sorry for anyone, which he of course would.

Robert understands my father and urges me to talk to him. The girls sometimes ask to see their grandfather, and Robert thinks that they should have that opportunity. I worry about that too, but Dad just complicates my life too much. I don't want the girls to have that. I don't want them to be scared.

Robert grew up in Amish country. He told me that when they were in high school, his sister had a shirt that his mother loved. The shirt had a marijuana leaf printed on it, but his mother thought it was a palm tree. Robert understands the kids and finite math, but not me and not my family. I married him because he was fun and liked hiking and we have common goals. And I love him. I didn't marry him for another income or another last name. He liked strong women. But he lost his job and stopped going hiking and started falling asleep during the six o'clock news.

People who dine with us say that Robert and I have the perfect marriage, and practically, we do. After dinner, he and I used to walk to a golf course where we'd lie on the ground and look at the sky. I'd never seen a shooting star, and he wanted me to. I still haven't, actually; I just pretended so that we could go home. But regardless of how dispassionate we may feel about each other now, I do know that we always put the girls first. He is a good father.

I met Allen at a medical conference. National lists rank Allen as one of America's most skilled surgeons. We'd been seeing each other for three years. With him, it wasn't always like an affair. A lot of days, we sat in the car and drank beer. Sometimes I met him on the coast for a night or two. We had fun.

I met him at a park two days before my scheduled flight to New York. We sat in his car with the radio on and kissed.

"Joan, why aren't you asking me to leave my wife?" he asked me.

"I'm married." I took a sip of my beer. I liked things the way that they were. Allen made my marriage better. He made me patient with Robert. He made me laugh, and I liked to kiss him. Allen allowed me to keep my life to myself. When I told him about my father, he listened and didn't offer advice or an opinion. He just asked that I let him know how it goes. We worry for each other. It's nice to have someone who secretly worries.

From the park, I drove home and woke Robert so that he could go to bed. I checked the girls, washed the dishes, and packed. At six the next morning, I woke Robert.

*"Joan, why aren't you asking me to leave my wife?" he asked.
"I'm married."*

He made coffee and drove me to the airport. My eyeliner was several days old, and unretouched. I'm an insomniac, and since I never went to bed I just left it on for the subsequent daytime. Eyeliner shifts around though, leaving undereye smudges, translucent and black. I usually just Q-tip it back into place before work. I'm an obstetrician, so make up doesn't matter so much. The lack of sleep doesn't matter much either. It's actually an advantage that I'm already awake when my beeper sounds at three-thirty in the

morning. My body is used to the interminable days by now.

I make good use of night. The unused nighttime gives me dark, amberlit time to read. It leaves me alone. I've been reading the Russians. My mother gives me her novels. She gets more and more Russian as she gets older. She thinks that my brother and I should too, and tries diligently to make me a normal person. She believes I'm strange and strong, with a dark side. I'm very normal. I am a partner in my practice and have an icemaker and a station wagon. I take my kids to soccer. I smoke three cigarettes a year and write exceptional thank-you notes.

My brother, however, majored in marketing at Vassar while I studied German at the University of Wisconsin. He took speed and made A's. He went immediately to law school whereas I waited tables for a year before deciding to ready myself for medical school. My brother William talks to Dad and to Mom. He's a very forgiving person with the ability to overlook things. A lot of people find that admirable and noble, but my brother's forgiveness is inattentive and extends to deadlines, birthdays, and scheduled events. He is my mother, but backward. Thorough and insistent, Mom used to send me etiquette books for Valentine's Day. Over Thanksgiving break she would ask me to cut my hair and give me instructions for diets.

When I came home for vacation from school, Mom always went to the bathroom while I took a bath. There were no locks. She's never been a quick woman, but she took

an exceptionally long time, always ready to glance away should I wash enough soap from my eyes to notice her looking. I rinsed my hair or scrubbed my face while mom looked over the white sections for a well-hidden tattoo. She never found one. She did sometimes catch the otherwise-scarred remnants of a hickey. She felt guilty then, afraid that I'd inherited her weaknesses and would become dazzled and mistaken. On those days she moved deliberately and shut the door behind her.

I don't talk to her very much now. She calls mostly to give me books and read my horoscope to the answering machine. Sometimes Robert answers the phone. He doesn't like so much the family that he married into, but I don't like my family so much either. Robert and I understand each other on that issue. Except that he sympathizes too much.

At the airport, Robert got my bag and made sure that I had my ticket. He told me to call later that night, but that the girls had games from six until nine. I kissed his unshaven face and went inside. I thought about how little I knew about marriage. I thought about how much I loved him, and how much he loved us. He did love the girls and me.

I wiped off a payphone across from my terminal and called. Allen answered distractedly. The strap of my carpetbag was slipping and I had to set down my coffeeecup to hoist it back on. The coffee was streaming heat and a few drops fell on my toes, "The flight's on time, so far."

"When are you coming home? Tuesday? You want to drive around Tuesday night?" I could tell that Allen was picking up things while we talked—probably unbending paperclips, or just watching sparks, holding the Zippo in his left hand. He has beautiful hands.

"I'll want to see my girls when I come home. And I'll be tired."

"I'll buy a sixpack."

"Robert will expect me home Tuesday. And I'd like to see the girls. I'll see you during lunch Wednesday." I didn't hear any other argument. "I just wanted to let you know that the flight's on time. I'll call you." We don't say I love you.

Through the flight, I tried to read a catalogue. Transportation makes me nervous. I used to carry a rosary on planes to feel safe, but Allen lost my rosary two summers ago. I'm not actually Catholic, though I know my family was when they were devout and bitter and Irish. So I identify with Catholicism. Allen radically disagrees with it. When he was nine, his mother beat him for cutting down a dogwood tree. The flowers represent the crucifixion, so she beat him and made him confess, crying, to a sharp-eyed nun. His mother liked gin; she also liked to dance.

I got to New York and found Dad's building. His hallway smelled like dog and vomit. The door was orange. Dad answered the door and hugged me. I kept my hands in my pockets. He had gotten small and his face was loose. He wore old man clothes. He looked at me and cried. His left arm shook the whole time. I looked down at the arm and walked. Inside smelled like whiskey and cat litter. The carpet was shaggy and sticky. It was hot and silty particles were in the air, as if the dryer pipe blew into the apartment. I was glad to have made hotel reservations for myself. We sat there. He offered me juice

and I sat on a green chair.

I could tell he had been drinking—liquor, not beer. He used to tell me that he didn't need it, back when I was fifteen and with one arm he could throw me over his shoulder. He was strong. He swam miles every day and in high school trained with Gertrude Ederle. Now his lips and his speech were slack. But his eyes looked warm. I rummaged in my bag to find the cigarettes I'd brought him and told him to sit down. I opened the windows and went to clean the kitchen. He talked to me, "I have a box of your things." He refused to sit in the living room and was watching me wash dishes and put food boxes away. "It's in the closet. Do you want some juice?"

"The juice is finished. It was an empty carton, and I threw it away." I watched my hand hold the pink sponge and scrub.

He exhaled. "Joanie, you've gotten to be very pretty." I still watched my hand. I knew that his was shaking. He went to sit in the living room. By this time, I was discovering empty bottles and cans in the stove and behind the curtains. He used to do that when we were little. It's easy for my brother to forgive Dad when he's on the other coast. It's easier for me, too, when I don't have to be here. Absence is better. It's better than seeing Dad vodka-drunk again at ten-thirty in the morning and then finding empties that he's hidden from himself.

When I was little, Dad drank bottles of Aristocrat. My brother and I hid in the pantry while he hit Mom. I talked to him about it once. He never responded completely. He thinks it's not his fault. My mother's brother's wife knew about all of this; she saw Mom in the dark glasses and long sleeves. Her one comment on the situation was, "Well, your mom can be very bossy and provoking. She's an odd person." That aunt never liked Mom because my mom became pregnant with my brother before she became married to my dad.

I finished in the kitchen. Dad was looking out the window from the green chair. I sat on the sofa and looked at him.

"How is Robert? Are you happy?" He coughed. "Marrying your mother was the best thing I ever did."

"Yes. We're good."

"How are the kids? Do you have any pictures?" I hadn't told him anything about the girls, just that I had them. If he had details about the girls, he could talk about them, claim them. I didn't think he had earned that privilege. He had wanted grandchildren—grandsons—since I turned twenty. I didn't tell him that my oldest daughter played piano now, or that I named her Vera after his great aunt. I didn't tell him that Sophie, my youngest, had his eyes, or how much that scared me.

"The girls are doing well. I didn't bring any pictures." My eye contact didn't falter.

He shook a little harder and inhaled a little more before he spoke again. "I always wanted you to have kids. I knew that you would like them. I always liked having your brother and you." Everything was simplified to vulgarity. I didn't respond. "You look good, Daughter. But are you sleeping?"

"I don't really sleep so much. I do things. There's a lot to do." I circled my shoe around a stain in the carpet. He used to talk to me about sleeping when I was still a



CURRY MOORE

student. My goal in life back then was to make my body so that it didn't need to sleep. I had gotten so successful at the attempts that it became second nature. "I take vitamins. I'm fine."

He tried to apologize to me, and I had to leave. I walked around the city. My sweater smelled like Dad's living room. It was getting dark and cold and the lights brighten in the cold. I walked down to a college bar in the Village and got a beer. I thought about the Monroes and their twins who would be born in my absence. I wanted to be home, if only for them. Diane Monroe was a first-time mother and not only rude in her pregnancy, but very nervous. I'm a good doctor; I could make her laugh. I could prevent her and her husband from choosing some really unfortunate family names. I could drug her up and have her name her children after Beatles songs. Allen loves the Beatles. Sadie and Jude would be nice names. I got a refill on the beer. I read the drink menu and tried to remember times when I'd had each one.

I finished my drink and walked back to the hotel. It was the kind of night that they use in advertisements for New York City. The air was poreless. The people were quick with post-theatre glow. It was cold but the bricks still held sun, and made your wallside warmer than your streetside. I love New York in the winter, when the cold makes all the windows clear and women wear long dark coats. After I began my residency, I dated a doctor who lived on Long Island. I always think of him when I think of New York. He took me to a club where a woman with a very simple voice sang Cole Porter covers. He and I were serious for three months. I ended it. His idealism ruined him.

At the hotel, I went to the pool and found the lights out, so I put on socks and sat in the dark in front of my big window, counting the windows of the buildings and thinking about the people who worked or lived behind each one. I didn't call Allen. I thought about Robert and my girls. The girls love cities. We think that Vera may be an architect; she loves to draw and notices details about structures, things that hold them together. Sophie observes. Robert and I talk to the girls like adults; they get shy when strangers and relatives lean down and simplify things.

The week before, we had been at the grocery store when Sophie overheard someone talking about possums. "Did you know that possums are nocturnal?" She looked at them from atop the buggy and ate another red grape. She has informed me that I am nocturnal. They both try to stay up with me. I let them try because regardless of how much they swim or read, they're always asleep by ten-fifteen. I carry them to bed and tell them that it's midnight.

I stayed on the floor until the room was cold, and then I got under the covers. I tried to sleep. My brain wasn't tired though, so I just lay under the covers with my eyes open in the darkness. The blanket was off-white with red and pink roses on it. I pulled the covers up to my collarbones and looked out at the window again. I started imagining the people who live and work at the windows. Then I started to think about Dad, so I listed all the places in New York City I could think of, then I lay there in the darkness and remembered things.

I do that often. I worry about my memories; I gave up NutraSweet to protect

them. So I lie in bed and look at things and run through sections of my life. I sometimes remember other people's stories too, usually old family ones that I want to keep for Vera and Sophie. I want to keep the pleasant ones. I have to focus when I'm listing memories at night like that. If I find bad ones, I tend to circle and keep remembering the bad ones with more and more intensity.

Tonight I remembered things about Allen. I used to feel blasphemous mixing memories like that—thinking of Robert and the girls and then thinking of Allen. I can't remember why I used to feel that way. I don't feel that way now. Allen is necessary to me. He's familiar and casual, and we have no expectations—except that we'll be there for each other, even if we don't talk for a month or two. I thought about this whole situation a lot that night. Sometimes I worry that I'm justifying things to myself. I worried about that as the sky turned moth gray and whited-out the windows of the city. Then I took a shower.

I walked toward Dad's apartment. A black stray cat darted in front of me. There were a few people out already. I watched the pigeons and the squares of white sky above the streets. I like morning. Morning makes me least tired. I thought as little as possible until I got to the building. I enjoyed the sound of the sidewalk and traffic. I thought as

*He hugged me for a long time.
I tried to hug him back.*

little as possible so that I would not be weak with my dad, not malleable under his tears and pathos.

Dad answered the door in his pajamas. I recognized them. "Good morning Joanie." He gave me a hug. I patted his shoulder.

"Good morning Dad."

"I have cereal and milk for you. And I bought some bananas. Do you still like those?" He walked toward the kitchen. It still looked clean.

"Yes. Thank you. I'll fix it. I'll fix some for you too." I didn't want him to have a knife. His hands shook. I didn't want him to spill everything either, so I put everything together and took it to him. He ate slowly. I just drank some milk. I wanted his clean dishes to last as long as possible.

He thanked me and I fluffed a throw pillow. He looked out the window again. "Where's that box again?" I waited for him to finish chewing. He gestured to the closet. The door stuck. The box was on the floor at the very front of the closet. It was covered in dust and strangely warped into an asymmetric diamond shape. I didn't recognize it at all. I held it away from my clothes and carried it back to the couch. "Well...thank you." I sat, got a paper towel from and wiped off the dust over the garbage. I set it on the linoleum and tore the tape; it had gotten mushy in the dampness.

Stacks of albums filled the box. Bundles of photographs lined the edges. I had never seen most of the books or the photographs. I took them out and started looking

through them. I wasn't sure with what attitude I should look at them, or with what pace. I knew that Dad was watching. I wasn't sure what I needed to communicate. I wasn't sure exactly what kind of gesture I was responding to. The pictures in the first book showed Ireland and our peasant ancestors on a farm. Progressively, the pictures became more recent. At the most recent, there were orange-tinted pictures of our family in the seventies. One of the books had pictures of my mother's parents at Ellis Island. I wondered how and why dad had kept these. Certainly Mom wanted them. They would make her excited.

I liked the pictures. It was okay that he'd lied to get me there, though it seemed pointless. I would have come for pictures before I'd have come for old posters and sophomore existentialism notes. The pictures made me happy.

"I want you to take those to your girls. I want you to show them."

I turned the page. William and I were catching frogs at the beach in 1964. I couldn't wait to show them to the girls. "They're going to love these." I smiled. "Thanks Dad."

He looked at me, bracing his shaky arm on the chair to stand. I got up to let him hug me. He hugged me for a long time. I tried to hug him back. "Joan, I need to ask you to do something." Oh God, I thought. "You're my daughter, Joanie." I hoped that he wouldn't cry. "I want to meet my granddaughters." His hand shook on my arm. "They should know their grandfather. Show them the pictures and tell them about me, and then let me meet them. I'll tell them stories." He tried to read me. "I used to tell you stories, Joanie. I'll tell the girls about my great-grandparents and about you and your brother."

I couldn't say anything. How could I tell Dad that he would scare my girls? I looked out the window, his hand still on my arm. Was I even right about that? Would he scare my girls? They're brave and less judgemental than I am.

"Joanie, I miss you. I don't know my granddaughters at all."

"Dad..." I put my hand on my face to think. "Dad, I don't know." I sighed. "You drink too much. You drank too much always. I've told you this. I was scared of you. I'm not now, but I was." Just doing this exhausted me. "My girls are good girls. I don't want them to be afraid...or confused. They're happy. I have to think about them."

"I won't drink."

"You weren't going to drink at graduation or my wedding or William's wedding..."

"I mean it. I won't."

"Dad, I don't think so." I hated this. He hugged me more. "I don't know right now." "Please."

"Dad, I have to go. I'll call you and we'll talk about this later. I have to talk to Robert." My hands started to shake. I tried to gather my belongings.

He took my upper arm to stop me and hugged me again. He said he loved his granddaughters. That he didn't have to know them to love them. He asked me to come back soon. He asked me not to abandon him again. I stood there and listened to a train somewhere nearby. His hand shook on my back. I separated myself from him and gathered the box. I just wanted to get home to my daughters.

HONEYSUCKLE TRAITORS

J.T. Sonia

The smell in the air was alive.
We knew springtime had come
When the honeysuckle
Climbed and blanketed
The farthest fence in the backyard,
Green and yellow and white

And buzzing.
The bees guarded those sweet buds
With loud enthusiasm.
The fat and droning,
Drunk on pollen,
Ambling through the air;
The small and fast
Shot by zipper-quick.
And were heard only after they were gone.

It wasn't until we were seven
That Dad told us the big ones
Couldn't sting,
It was the other ones we should watch out for,
Those same little bee bastards we rescued
From the shallow puddles left after
A spring shower.

Their treachery surprised
My little brother and I,
But that didn't stop us from sucking
The heavy, sweet nectar,
Or from saving the bees
From springtime puddles.

GRANDADDY BILL

Shannon Robinson

Every time he came to our house,
A Jack Daniel's on ice rested in his left palm.
While I sat in his lap,
The odor curled through the air
As he told my brothers jokes
That made them laugh so hard
They fell to the yellow, linoleum floor,
Whether they understood them or not.

When they laughed,
A piece of his loneliness melted away
Like an ice-cube on a hot skillet,
Reminding him he still lived.
He tossed his head back,
Cackling fifty years of smoking
Into a cough.

When hunger tapped his shoulder,
My mother put popcorn in the microwave,
While the dog sat on the floor wagging her tail
In hopes of getting some.
Sometimes I think he loved her even more
Than he loved us.
She made the wrinkles around his eyes bend,
Lighting up the footprints of his past.
He traded her popcorn for a shaken paw,
Just to hear my brothers brag about how smart she was.

Finally, exhausted from the fuss
Of three small children,
He walked with care and the pain of old age
Toward the brown, faded recliner in the den.
He slept, with the soundness of a weight,
The alcohol pulling his eyes shut
Like an elixir for insomnia,
Until his deep and rolling snores woke him.
As the sunlight faded,
He put on his plaid, wool coat, kissed our foreheads,
And headed home for another night of solitude.

SMILING AND WRITHING (FOR TWO REBELS)

Joe Chandler

Blocked by misconceptions we lay puzzled in the road,
Smiling and writhing. We chose to remain Naked,
And so stand slowly limb by lanky limb (still loosely
Smiling), barely looking up. And
There they stand so slippery slyly, wryly questioning
Our choice of apparel, whispering to their lackeys—
Dressing us with disapproving slowly moving social
Stereotypes. They are scratchy scorching (we bleed)
So we slough them off, hand them back, and
Wink; they bow so board like a stiff and still
Wish to see us struggle. (But) Our skin cries trails of
Blood as we
Bow our heads together, And
Break (SHATTERED!)

THE FALL

John Seay

It's early October and the leaves are falling again. On days like today when a rapid rain hammers at my window, when it taps torrentially in triplets against my pane, I find myself in a pensive, reflective mood. I want to tell you something today as best I can, if you'll listen. I want to tell you of fall and how I learned to dread it. I want to tell you that there is something about it now that breaks my heart. I want to tell you that there is something about fall that unnerves me as I walk through it, breathing it. I can only speculate the reasons why I am so affected by fall. Maybe it's the way the leaves crackle above me as I walk underneath them, how when caught in a swift wind they quiver and fall, the gaps between them providing channels for paling sunlight. Maybe it is for the slowly growing skeletons of trees that I am now discouraged by fall—the brittle branches like ancient, gray fingertips reaching out and up and anywhere in some desperate attempt to clutch at something real. It breaks my heart, the fall. It breaks my heart to watch such careful, calculated dying.

You see, the rain on this October day reminds me of something that happened nearly three years ago, a week before my fifty-fourth birthday. This something enters my mind on days like today and will not leave no matter what pains I take to expel it from my thoughts. I used to go walking, in fall. I would walk, too, during spring, during summer, and even during winter, but no season provided me with the same pleasing emotions as did walking in fall at dusk. In fall only three years ago I walked every evening, to calm myself, to think. I was eagerly protective of this time alone. I went there, along the path by the river, to think and to watch and to be alone. There, I heard snippets of conversations that did not apply to me, but that only floated in my direction like the river might bring debris. Some of the debris I heard was interesting, other debris was tedious, but I could choose to leave all of it if I liked. There, along the path, I enjoyed my solitude—I cherished it. And now, I miss it dearly.

Though I don't know why, on this particular occasion I am telling you about, I arrived late at the park. Various friends had told me that my peaceful park was not so peaceful at night, but because dusk had only just recently passed, I felt safe and justified in taking my nightly walk. I don't recall why I was late—perhaps I merely lost track of time. Perhaps I chose to continue writing past four o'clock, my usual stopping time. I don't remember now, and perhaps it isn't important. At the least though, and by way of some sort of explanation, the reason for my lateness might be attributed to some minute incident, the like of which happens so often, the effect of which slightly skews well-crafted plans, and only after the newly arranged plans go awry, gains significance.

I should tell you too, before I properly begin, that I am a family man—a man of my word, a dependable man. Though recently my wife and I have drifted apart, I have never cheated on her, nor have I ever felt any more of an urge than most married men feel. Do I ever fantasize? Of course. But to act? To act is something entirely different. I have never acted, and rarely have I even found myself contemplating such an event. Most men, it seems, go from companion to companion in some desperate search for something. I find it is themselves that they fear most in those cases. The thick, choking fear of men who relegate themselves to constantly clutching at life, yet always finding themselves

falling farther and farther away from the source. Their existence is skeletal. They continually reach out for something they will never grasp.

But to continue, on this particular walk, having arrived late, I parked my car in the usual place—underneath the sycamore tree. I noticed on that day the yellow and orange leaves on the ground. They reminded me of my wife, who often accompanied me on my walks, many years ago. I remember she enjoyed the exoskeleton-like crunch of stepping on dried leaves as well as the time spent quietly walking. We were in love then, you see. That was many years ago.

Though darkness was quickly coming and my night vision poor at best, I noticed very few visitors to the riverside trail, which did not surprise me at this late hour. I imagine I did not think about that then as I walked towards the trail beneath bare branches, reflecting perhaps on my soon to be fifty-four years.

By a park bench a mother, protectively clutching her purse, called sternly for her children. Her shoulder-length brown hair seemed laden with grease and looked as if a

I want to tell you something today as best I can, if you'll listen. I want to tell you that there is something about the fall that unnerves me as I walk through it, breathing it.

strong wind might come about and lift the entirety of it like the greasy lid to some giant pale pot. She turned when she heard my footsteps and clutched her bag closer to her breast. As if embarrassed at her quick fearful reaction, she smiled weakly but did not diminish her hold on her purse. I smiled and nodded.

"Those devils," she said nervously as I walked by, referring to her children. She addressed me with her entire body. "I tell you they're devils," she said again, but with little conviction.

Slightly unnerved by the odd woman, I walked past her quickly, closer to the river, close to where the scent reaches my nose and carries me nearer. The river is lined with park benches, wooden with cast iron legs. Often people sit at the benches, reading, or gazing out across the river. I also once enjoyed sitting there and watching the river eat at the banks, carrying trash and dirt farther down the channel. As I neared the first set of benches, I noticed a man, fidgety, sitting underneath a giant sycamore tree, mumbling something to himself and occasionally standing up abruptly and looking about as if waiting for someone to arrive.

I admit, I didn't think anything of him at first, but walked on steadily, humming a tune to myself, hands buried in my coat pockets. As I approached him, though, his attire began to strike me, as did his mannerisms and muffled voice. After approaching closer to the man, I noticed on him an odd costume, or what certainly appeared to me as a costume.

He wore a short leather cap, the kind you might find a biker wearing. The cap

was pushed down, encroaching upon near half of his ample, furrowed forehead, exposing thick red hair that curled back behind his ears, burrowing against his neck as if cold. I walked nearer, noticing his leather pants, which looked exceedingly tight. The man cursed to himself and looked constantly to his left and then to his right and then behind him, all the while cursing. Periodically, he would grab the crotch of his leather pants and pull down with such force that the veins on his temples pulsed, seeming to maneuver his hat, pushing it down farther along his forehead angrily towards slit-like eyes.

The man looked up irritably at me as I passed him. I dug my hands into my coat pocket and whistled a tune I'd heard from some passing car radio earlier. I could feel the man eyeing me as I walked, his entire head turning to trace my motion as I quickened my pace to pass him.

“What are you looking at?” The man addressed me.

I feigned a startled look.

“What do you mean, sneaking up on me like that?” He said again.

I told the man as politely and as unassumingly as I could that I meant nothing at all, that I was only out on a walk, which I took near every evening in fall. I did not tell him that if I had planned to sneak up on him, that I would not have chosen the clearly marked walking path as my avenue of attack. Despite what my wife might tell you, I still have my wits about me, even though I am aging.

Instead of responding to my explanation, the man jerked his head around from left to right and then looked behind me as he cursed again. Hoping the encounter over, and a bit angry myself at being ignored, I began to walk on again.

The man's mouth opened and closed several times and his tight, leather pants creaked and cringed with each false start the man attempted.

“Haven't you ever seen this kind of thing before,” he said finally, defiantly approaching me as if prepared to fight. “Haven't you ever seen a guy in leather pants before, waiting for his wife?”

I admit that the mention of the word “wife” caught my attention. I'm an upstanding person and I immediately wondered why this man chose to mention to me that his wife was late. I began to suspect that the diminutive man took me for an unmarried elderly businessman, the kind of person who would never find a wife.

I assured the man that I had seen men in leather pants before, and that I myself had often waited for my wife. I told him that women are notoriously late, in an effort to cheer him. He merely cast me a scolding look and approached me, his sharp chin jutting upwards towards my face. The man had an Irish look about him, with his red hair and bulging green eyes. I noticed several scars on his forehead and chin.

“Don't you ever do this sort of thing, with your wife I mean? I mean, what do you do when things don't happen like they used to?”

He then began in a calmer voice, to explain his situation to me.

“Ten years and I never saw it coming, either. Many nights my wife and I spent together. You don't believe me?” The man's face scrunches up tightly and slightly reddened. “You look like you don't believe me. We did. There was something there.”

At this he took off his short leather cap, unbuttoned the top button on his black, leather pants, and sat down on the park bench.

"That is," he continued, "until I discovered something a year ago that no man likes to learn about his wife." The man screwed up his eyes in thought, wringing his cap in his hand as if milking the udders of the animal whose skin provided it. "You see, I told my wife I knew about him. She cried, swore never to see him again, especially on Saturdays, when I go to the tracks."

He now looked up at me again as I moved closer to him, sitting down tentatively, finally, on the other side of the park bench.

"I'm sorry, sir," I told him. "I've been married for twenty-five years now. Sure, the idea of infidelity has crossed my mind, and recently we've drifted, my wife and I, but..." and here the poor man interrupted me, angry again.

"I'll tell you—I'll explain why I'm dressed like this. You see, we decided to spark things up again by assuming different roles and playing them out once a month, on the second Tuesday of the month, which is today."

I didn't say anything, but looked out ahead of me in silence. Many things crossed my mind and I admit I imagined certain events transpiring between my wife and me, but dismissed the idea as impracticable. Are such things acceptable?

The man continued.

"I bet you're wondering, where my wife is tonight, huh? Well, certain information came to light again. I found his letter to her. Sealed. I showed her and, you see, she claims to have found another, younger man. She claims to have left me. That was three weeks ago, sir, but I think she'll see her mistake and meet me here tonight dressed in her favorite costume. You just wait. Watch for the blonde in a barmaid outfit. Don't you believe me? I won't let her make a fool out of me."

Here the man's eyes turned towards me, as if half-expecting me to pull his wife out of my coat pocket.

When I merely returned his gaze, he started wildly, "I will wait for her here, and when she comes, we'll see, we'll see." He stood up then and brandished his leather cap, now as if it were a weapon.

Politely, I asked the man how long he'd been waiting. He told me two hours. I mumbled some excuse and stood to leave as the man continued talking, not so much to me as to himself.

"She tried to make me think that I'd finally lost it," he rambled, not even realizing I was leaving. "She made me think that I couldn't please her, that I was getting too old...."

This last thought was too much for me. I am aging, but I feel very healthy—much healthier than other men I know do in their early fifties. I left him there, still

I began to imagine another woman's skin pressed against mine, what another woman's hair might feel like against my neck.

mumbling to himself, looking about as if preparing to leave. I walked on for a bit, to give an impression of nonchalance, and then turned sharply right to cut across the center of the park towards my car. I'd had enough of that park. As I walked, I thought about the man's story.

As humans tend to do, you see, I began to internalize his story, to personalize it. My thoughts turned inevitably to my wife and our marriage. I began to remember a certain night on leave when things went farther than appropriate with a young local girl. I began to imagine another woman's skin pressed against mine, what another woman's hair might feel like against my neck. You must understand, though, that I am an upright man. I am not a coward, and I will not let my wife dismiss me as one. I am healthy. I am not near as old as my years suggest. At certain times a man craves something that may have left him. The man on the park-bench was a sad spectacle, but I must tell you—while walking I began to be afraid that I no longer pleased my wife.

Before I continue, I must tell you too that my encounter with the odd little man confused and confounded me. I began to have all sorts of wild thoughts that I wouldn't usually have. I began to wonder, began to grow suspicious. Things not important before

*Her eyes widened, misinterpreting my comment.
Her eyes moved to my groin.*

began to weigh on me. Where was my wife last week when she agreed to meet me at the club and did not show up? What does she mean eating dinner in her room without me? As I walked along thinking, growing increasingly confused, I noticed another shape to my left, a woman walking quickly towards me. I stopped, imagining the woman approaching me to be the wife of the sad man on the park bench, come to meet him after all. I took great comfort in that idea, until she approached me and soon made it obvious that she was no man's wife at all.

"Hey, mister?" She asked me, looking about nervously. She placed a skinny hand on her hip and jerked her head back mechanically, avoiding my eyes.

"I'm sorry," I said, confused.

"Don't be—you want to party?" She asked again, this time raising her skirt a little. Her fingernails were long and red, though chipped around the edges.

I paused, flustered. Someone had told me once about the park at night. I had never been there late enough to see it for myself. I looked to the ground, at anything but the empty treetops above me. I began to imagine certain circumstances. Why shouldn't a man look for pleasure? Aren't certain things owed to him in a marriage? Doesn't he have the right to search for them elsewhere when he no longer encounters them with his wife? What about the man on the park bench, I wondered, what is the difference when you pretend to be someone else?

"I can't," I said finally.

Her eyes widened, misinterpreting my comment. Her eyes moved to my groin.

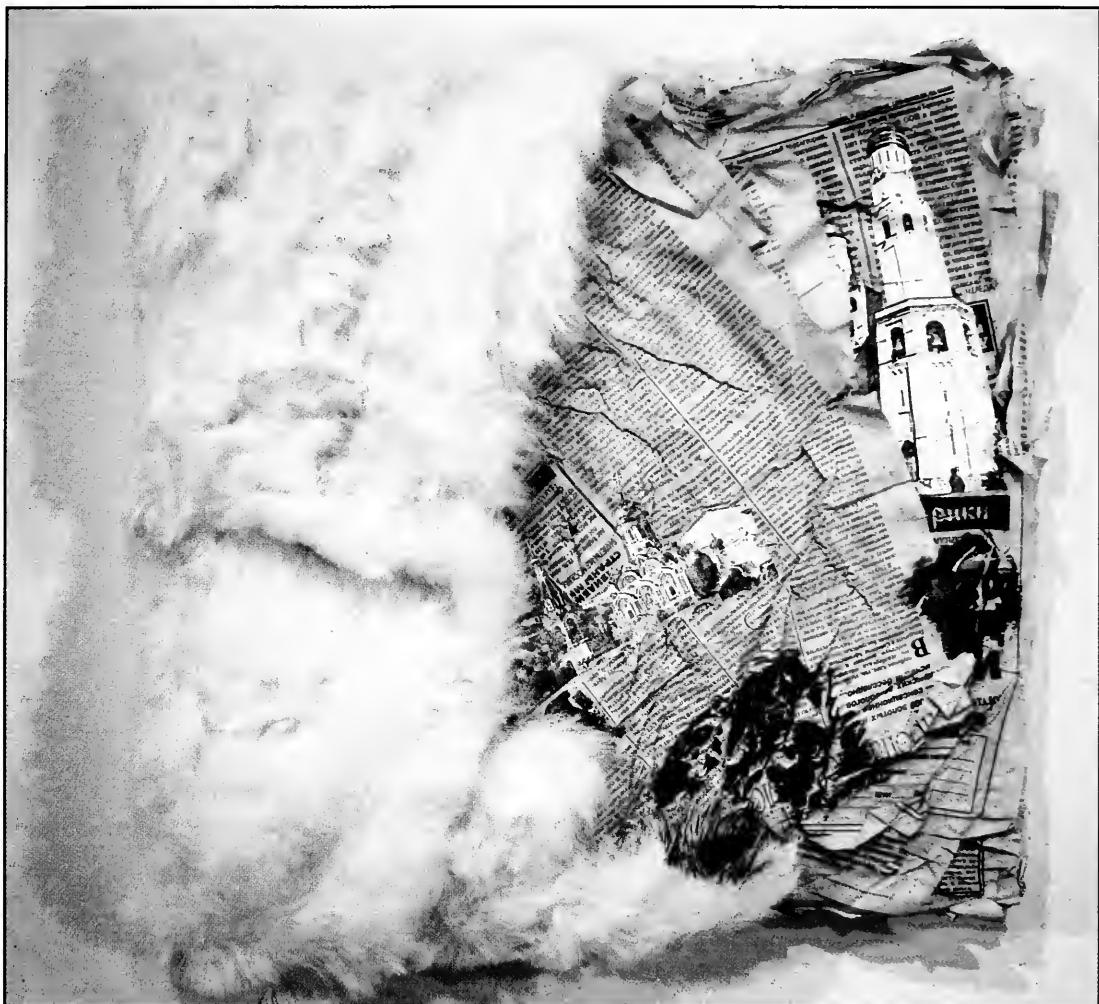
“War injury?” She said in a young voice, almost condescendingly.

I looked at her and her eyes looked back at me. I walked away quickly.

To reiterate a previous point, I’m an honest man. I have never cheated on my wife. I have had certain thoughts, yes, but to act—I never will. I walked towards my car quickly, turning back only once to see the young girl move back towards the river with one skinny hand on her hip. She was soon too far away to be called back, even if I had wanted.

As I approached my car, I found myself unable to concentrate on anything but fall, the weather around me. The branches overhead began then to look ominously foreboding instead of softly calming, and I began to imagine that their creak and crackle were some sort of demonic laugh, or at least the sound produced by friction from leather pants. Strangely disgusted, I drove back to my house by the hill and said hello to my wife as I entered the door.

You see, there is something about that man at the park bench that breaks my heart, just as there is something about fall that unnerves me now. Above me if I go walking, long, skinny branches like brittle bones waver slightly and some, the weaker ones, come crashing down around me. The others, the not-yet-dead, hang on quietly, dancing above me in the air, reaching upwards and outwards in some last, desperate attempt to clutch at something real. It breaks my heart to watch such careful, calculated dying.



KATYA MEYKSON

LETTER FROM THE STRIP-MINED LAND I WISH I HAUNTED

Charles Horn

I drove here after work, in ruts the same shape
as the ones in your driveway
when I came trudging back,
rain pounding reminiscent tattoos
on the car's hollow roof.

I wrote a letter to patch strip mines
but I only covered over asphalt
with new innovative concrete,
and now I'm hitting the starter
climbing to the top of another hill
on an antiquated main road,
slipping through land sliced
to the veins of tar and groundwater
drying up in an ozone sun.

There's a road sign up ahead, its stern
black arrow pointing left
framed by yellow blisters and rashes of rust.
It's directed no one for years now
and gushes at me like an old aunt.

I fling the cracked wheel and if I make the curve,
I'll see you this weekend.

SUNDAY AFTERNOON

Natalie Hummel

Grandma swept the carpet
in her floral Sunday dress.
“Sweep, sweep, sweep,”
she’d sing to me.
Clouds of scented dust rose
with each stroke:
peppermint, hairspray,
and perfume, Chantilly,
hinting at powder and thyme.

Grandpa sat, eyes closed,
within his velvet armchair.
Opening his eyes to the clock,
he waited for supper.
A ring-tailed cat sat in his lap,
its eyes matching the blue-gray
of Grandpa’s overalls.

Grandma changed clothes
for cleaning the hen.
Her shimmery hands
turned white and muddled
when she kneaded fresh dough.
Fruits, fresh from their garden
of sixty years, blessed the table
I had set with respect and care.

When the sun hit the deep
browns of the hardwood floor
she would wash her hands
and call him to the table.

BAY WINDOW SHOWER

Margaret Mroczek

For months you have lived
In the corner of my head
Poisoning thoughts like well water.
I keep you hunched over, confined
Like a statuette, or satellite
Caught in mid orbit.
I have begun to recreate
Your voice from albums of memory,
Like a mad scientist
Working with tone and pitch.
Soon I'll have you mapped,

Stretched across canvas
To rehabilitate you under my brush
With a halo and bouquet
Of summer flowers,
Suppressing your urge
To tramp the world
Until your hair grows shades of silver.
I am not like you – my spirit is bottled.
To me the road reeks
Of Dramamine and half-smoked cigarettes,
Swallowing people like Bermuda sea.

You hold your breath
And search for inner beauty
Under lamplights and waterfalls,
Slowing time to watch gin
Evaporate from pale blue tumblers
In the liver spotted hands of socialites.
You chase it everywhere it goes
But I am here
Watching constant rainfall,
As open as a hardback book
With a million unread pages.

SUNDAY TEARS

Emily Heck

The spoon delicate
enters the top foam layer that does not
resist penetration.

Vanilla bean particles
scatter, soil the milky combination of
heavy cream and sugar and vanilla.
Lush chocolate cake soaked, satiated
dripping and vulnerable.

The spoonful, the bite
icy, pricks my tongue, taste buds
then melts.

Brown chocolate crumbles
into soupy mush.

Around the glass goblet
cold droplets reveal themselves
and drip down
like slow tears sliding
then smashing
with a splash
of salty wetness
onto glossed oak.

Warm sweet melted light brown cream
in the bottom of the bowl.



CURRY MOORE

MILL WORK

Charles Horn

Even with the cant hook, I couldn't.
The log stayed rooted,
this time to the rusted railroad rails.

It snagged earlier too, plowing a trough
through black earth, grass tearing like hair
behind the tractor.

My uncle stained with impatience,
smelling like sweat and hot pine resin,
grabbed the hook and threw the log,
making a noise low in his throat.

It heaved onto the carriage,
and moved down the mill,
lined up with the blade,
the regimenting engine straining,
whipping its pulley troops with belts.

The blade sliced the log
with delicate intensity
into carefully measured
lengths, widths, depths,
that I could throw
on the stack like toothpicks
when we were done.

At sunset, I slipped back down the hill
to fool around the malicious blade.
But it didn't whirl to life
and fling itself upon my leg,
its gaunt teeth only grinned,
slightly skewed.

HANK'S LIFE

Stephanie Rebman

Hank was woken up by his mom slamming around in the kitchen and her dog barking. Usually she slept in until about 10 o' clock and nobody had to deal with her in the morning. He remembered that his dad was out of town today, so his mom had to take his little sisters to school. Life was always rough when his dad was out of town since his mom was exceptionally mean. "Well," Hank said out loud to himself, "here goes another day in my lousy life." He got out of his bed, the warm safe haven where nobody could hurt him, and prepared himself for another day of dealing with his mom and school.

Hank went into the kitchen and sat down with a bowl of Multi-Grain Cheerios, his favorite cereal. His mom stormed into the room and yelled, "You know the rule is that you are not allowed to eat until you feed the birds! Dump that bowl of cereal out right now and you are not eating until dinner. And if I find out that you bought a lunch at school I will take your father's belt to you!"

Hank looked at his mother as he patiently dumped the cereal out. He would buy some food at school for lunch. His sisters who were sitting at the table eating their cereal looked at her fearfully. He felt sorry for Katie and Sarah, his twin sisters. They were only seven and were not used to the way that his mother was. Yet at the same time they did not understand the extent of her madness, as they were still young and naive. For all they knew he would not be able to eat lunch. They would save him something from their lunches to give to him after school so he could eat. He was practically best friends with his little sisters. He just wanted to be there for them when they reached his age and had to deal with everything that he has. He hoped they would be able to handle it.

She probably would try to take the belt to him as she threatened and he would just have to take it or get kicked out of the house. He had to abide by her rules. Everyone in the family just did what she said and tried to stay away from her. Even his dad let her boss him around. His dad just did what she said and if he didn't complete a task to her satisfaction, he had to try again. It seemed that there was no pleasing her, so why even try, Hank thought. Hank also noticed how she believed that she was always right. When Hank was accepted to the National Honor Society, his mom said that the only reason why he got in was because a teacher on the committee liked him. It was not his multiple clubs and activities and a 3.7 grade point average. She never gave him or anyone credit for anything.

He looked over at her. She was wearing black, pleated pants and a white blouse. She was dressed up today, since it was her day to go in and volunteer at Katie and Sarah's grade school. She helped in the front office doing general secretarial duties like stuffing envelopes and typing. Tomorrow she would have a Girl Scout meeting, where she was the troop leader for Hank's sisters and classmates. It seemed to Hank that his mom was always nice to people outside of the family. Many of his friends thought she was nice, and she was friendly and talkative to strangers on the phone. Hank looked up and noticed her brown hair was getting grayer, and the wrinkles around her brown eyes were becoming

*Life was always
rough when his dad
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exceptionally mean.*

more prominent. Her lips were pursed so tightly that he could see her pink lipstick clumping. He thought that she used to be a good-looking mother, and his friends all used to think that she was hot a couple of years ago. She even used to be somewhat nice to him during elementary school, but as she yelled and shook the cordless phone at him, all he saw was ugliness.

She was carrying her tiny toy terrier, Sally, in her arms. She always walked around with Sally who snipped and snarled at the rest of the family, even though Hank was the person that walked, fed, and bathed her. Even though he loved animals, he disliked that dog. It was as mean as spit and reminded him of his mother.

Remembering it was laundry day he asked, "Hey, mom, when you do the laundry can you not put my colored shirts in the dryer?"

She replied, her face in a mocking grin, "Hey? Hay is for horses. Don't call me hay. Do you think I am a moron? I am not stupid enough to put your shirts in the dryer. I don't want to shrink your clothes. Then I would have to look at your fat rolls more than I already do."

Looking at his mother's face and her smart ass contorted smile of victory, which displayed coffee and smoked-stained teeth, Hank simply walked away thinking how pathetic she was and prepared for the day at school. She probably thought up that line about the fat rolls yesterday and was waiting to use it. He knew that he wasn't fat, but she was just saying that to make herself feel slimmer. Sure, he could lose a little bit on his stomach, but he was happy with his weight and he was in shape. As he was heading back to his room the phone rang.

"Who is calling our house at six thirty in the morning? Hank, that better not be one of your friends." She answered on the first ring with a angered and defiant "hello."

Sure enough, it was Sammy, saying that he could not give Hank a ride to school. Sammy found a girlfriend so Hank was no longer a priority. Hank thought that Sammy was much better looking than him and got all of the attention from girls. He had brown wavy hair, dressed nice, and had a black Mustang. They had been friends since the seventh grade when they met at a summer basketball camp.

Basketball was Sammy and Hank's favorite sport, and they used to play everyday after school in preparation for tryouts in the winter for all three years of high school. But things changed when Sammy got a girlfriend and Hank's mom loaded on the chores. They couldn't practice enough. They both tried out every year but neither of them made the team. Coach was looking for really tall guys or guys that could dribble the ball like Michael Jordan. Hank had been cut three years in a row now, but he still wanted to try out again next year. He was convinced that the team would be better with him on it.

He hung up with Sammy and said, "Mom, I'm going to walk to school; Sammy can't get me."

"No, you're not walking to school. Don't dictate to me what you are going to do. I make the rules around here. You're not crossing Taylor Avenue."

"I'm seventeen. I know how to cross a four lane road."

"Don't talk back to me. You're grounded for a month. You need to watch your

mouth. Go get ready; I'll drop you off at school. I don't care what you think. I've seen you almost get hit crossing that street several times." Her words were spit out like venom.

Hank went to his room and got ready for school. He threw on a pair of dark blue jeans that had a hole beginning to form in the knee and a blue t-shirt from a soccer camp back during the summer before high school. He didn't like soccer at the time, but his mom made him go because she wanted him out of the house. He grabbed a blue sweatshirt to wear as well. He looked in the mirror and saw that his glasses were smudged and bent and his coarse brown hair was rumpled.

Hank wished his dad was home so he didn't have to deal with his mom this morning. Whenever he had to deal with her in the mornings it always started his day off badly. He wondered why his dad married his mom. Perhaps she was not this way when they got married. He just could not understand why anyone would willingly put up with her. As he brushed his hair and teeth he kept thinking to himself, only one and a half more years and then I'm free.

Hank finished getting ready and waited by the door for his mom. His day was beginning wonderfully with a ride to school from his mommy, looking like a little fresh-

"I don't want to shrink your clothes. Then I would have to look at your fat rolls more than I already do.

man. He would like to think that she was giving him a ride because she cared about him, but he believed it was simply a control issue. If only his parents would let him get his license like a normal teenager, he would be content. The brand new white BMW awaited him, mommy in the driver's seat, who valued the car more than him.

Walking outside, Hank's mom ordered him to put his hat on. "Put your hat on. It is thirty degrees outside. You'll get sick if you don't"

"I'm not cold." Even though Hank was cold, he was not about to admit it since he was one of the only students who would be wearing a hat. It was just uncool and dumb to wear one. It wasn't even cold enough yet to freeze his nose hairs, so what was the point of even bothering with a hat. Nevertheless, he wore the hat so that he wouldn't get yelled at more.

"Do what I said. From now on, you'll be paying me one dollar for every time that your hat is not on."

Hank just sat there and listened. Resentment and anger filled his head with a rattling, and gave him a loathing-filled headache that seemed like it could last for days.

She started asking him questions about how school was and how his friends were doing. She also asked how his literature class was going and if the teacher was giving him problems. He basically gave her one word answers since he was not in a good mood. Plus, he didn't really hear everything she said. He was lost in thought of when he stopped liking her. Sure, he believed that he loved her, since she was his mom, somewhere deep

down inside of him. But everyone has a love for their mom.

He decided he stopped liking her in third grade. One incident was when the family had gotten in from going out to eat and his mom went straight for the TV, dumping all of her belongings as well as a half full ice cream container on the floor. She accidentally knocked it over and made Hank clean it up. He had to hang up her coat and put away her shoes, as well as clean up the ice cream mess. He looked at her, stuck his tongue out, and then made a real nasty face, crinkling up his nose, gaping open his mouth, and shaking his head. Both his dad and his mom saw him making the face. His mom said to him that she brought him into this world, and she could take him out if she wanted; the least he could do for her is to hang up a coat. Then she told him to go to hell.

A couple of days later, his mom had told his dad to go to hell when he walked in the door from work. They must have gotten into an argument or something. His mom went into another room and Hank came down the stairs and apologized to his dad for his mom. He remembered that at the time he felt that was the worst thing in the world to say to his dad, who was really nice and didn't deserve to go to hell. Hank had apologized for his mom's actions all of his life. She was always annoying his friends, teachers, and even strangers. Hank had always felt the need to apologize to people for her indecent behavior.

As his mom turned onto Taylor Avenue, he prepared himself for getting into the building and getting the hat off with the fewest number of people seeing him. His mom pulled up next to the city busses and other parents dropping off their freshmen. Hank ran into the school, whipped the hat off as soon as he got to the door, and stuffed it deep down into his backpack. His face was dry and red from the harsh cold and he was actually glad that he wore the hat, but he would never admit it.

Hank got to his locker, but he couldn't get it open and became frustrated. 6-33-19 was not working. The hall monitor would have to come un-jam it during the day or else he could kick it good and hard and leave a dent. He became flustered and just said forget it; he would not take his history book to class today.

Groups of students were gathered in the hallways. They sat along the walls or in circles in doorways. People looked at him as he walked by and started talking in low voices or stopped talking completely. Hank realized that these gossips were probably just talking about one of their friends and didn't want him to hear the latest news, but he worried that they were all talking about him. They were all stuck-up and popular, and it was their job to gossip. After all, he didn't exactly hang with the popular crowd. He didn't go drinking with them on the weekends or go to the football players parties. He didn't dress in Abercrombie and Fitch sell-out clothes. He would wear nice clothes occasionally from somewhere like Brooks Brothers but he didn't buy it for a label or to be cool; he bought it for its quality. Plus, he didn't have a girlfriend so people would surely look down on him automatically. He supposed that would be reason enough to talk about him. But he realized he was probably being paranoid.

Hank actually could have been sitting with the popular people if it weren't for his parent's rules. Freshman year he was very popular for about the first three months. He had friends all over the school and everyone would be saying hi to him as he passed in the

hallways. People stopped talking to him though once they found out he was not allowed to give out his phone number, date until he was sixteen, or go out on the weekends. Plus, if he was allowed to go out, a parent had to be with them. So people stopped talking to him and never asked him to hang out with them. But it worked out for the good because he was content with the group of friends that he had at school. They were funny and nice guys and girls. They also never gave up on asking him to go out every weekend. Even though they knew he couldn't go, they still invited him.

As he made it past the stuffy, popular people, he noticed the hallways thinning. Hank was once again tardy because his mom took him today. She had no concept of time whatsoever. She always told him that he would get there when he got there. She did that with birthday parties when he was younger as well. He was always the last to arrive and the first to leave. His little sisters deal with that as well right now, and it makes them mad. The bell for first period rang.

Hank walked into class and found his assigned seat, the second one closest to the

*What's your problem?
You're not done.
You didn't vacuum the
couch or chairs.*

door, which was good because it ensured that he would get out the door, to his locker, and to his next class before the bell rang. But, he preferred to be in the back goofing off with his friends. He received an annoyed look from the teacher for intruding late. The teacher was acting like he had just been slapped in the face.

"A little late Hank." Mr. Numie walked with a slight limp in his step and had a twitch where he screwed up his mouth, pulled at the collar of his shirt and jerked his head sideways. It was rumored around school that he was a clown before he started teaching and during the summers. People thought he was mean because he wasn't "getting any," and if he was, they figured it was with another man.

"Sorry, traffic was bad." Actually, there was no traffic, but there was no way he would say that his mom had to take him to school. Hank's face was already turning red, his leg was shaking from nerves, and his pen was twitching in his hand when suddenly Mr. Numie flipped out.

"Hank! Are you masticating a forbidden substance?"

Hank completely forgot he was chewing gum and hoped he wouldn't get a detention. "Uh, yeah, sorry."

"Get rid of it. Here's your test...maybe you could study a little more next time along with the rest of the class."

After spitting out his gum, he looked at his grade and wanted to cry like a girl. He would have rather gotten a detention than the embarrassment Mr. Numie caused. He studied for four hours for this history test. It was on three chapters, from World War I to World War II. He outlined chapters, made note cards with vocabulary terms on it, and still got a C, which was the equivalent of an F in his mind. He was just a poor test taker.

The C taunted him and gleamed on the paper. It jumped off the paper and threw itself right into his face and went immediately to his chest. It filled his heart and lungs and

Hank could not breathe for a moment. His heart violently thudded in his chest. He recalled watching the movie *Dumb and Dumber* last weekend when he wasn't allowed out of the house and feeling like the chef when Jim Carrey punched a hole in the chef's chest and yanked out his heart.

Gently resting his head on his desk, on top of his folded arms, Hank hid his tears and silently wished that everything would just go away. Of course, after only five hours of sleep and Mr. Numie's boring lecture droning in the background, Hank fell asleep on the hard, brown desk covered with graffiti.

He was awoken by Sammy. "Hank! Hank! What are you doing?"

"Huh?"

"You've slept through first period and second period."

"Shit."

Sammy started messing with him, "Man, you look like a St. Bernard with that drool all over your face." Laughing, Sammy joked, "Who were you dreaming about this time?"

"Screw you man."

Sammy laughed, "There is an imprint of your spiral notebook and your watch on your forehead. God, you're such a loser. Nobody likes you enough to wake you up!"

"Wonderful. You're such a jerk."

"Need a ride home from school?"

"Yeah, that would be cool."

"No prob. Why don't you tell your mom that we have a meeting with our chemistry group and we'll hit up Mickey-D's real quick after school? Hey, and maybe even Taco Bell and Burger King on the way back."

"Sure, why not! And, if my mom doesn't like it, she can just kiss my ass!"

"Big Mac's here we come."

Later that afternoon Sammy dropped off Hank after the McDonalds trip. He had dreaded going home to the dragon, who had been sitting in front of the TV ever since she got home from volunteering, eating junk food, and preparing for his arrival, Hank took his time walking to the door and kicked snow piles along the way. He took a deep breath when he crossed the threshold of the door, slinked in quietly, but unfortunately, noticed.

"Good, you're home. Took you long enough. You need to walk Sally. Then, you need to vacuum the entire house, sweep and dust all of the stairs, do the dishes, and the laundry. Clean your room or else we'll move you into a smaller one. Then, you may do your homework. But you better be in bed by eleven. None of this staying up until one o'clock in the morning doing homework. I want you in bed."

Not even acknowledging her, or disputing that he had two tests on Friday, two days away, Hank began his chores. After walking Sally, he began dusting off the basement stairs. The stairs were shiny and glossy. He could almost see himself in them, due to constant cleaning. Pastel blue paint attempted to disguise scratches from the dog's nails and dents from dropped objects. The plain white paper towel swept up dog hair as Hank contemplated his life. He asked himself many questions. His facial features were set

solidly; lips squeezed and eyes wide open, trying desperately to think of why he was still on this earth. Did he even have a purpose?

Maybe he had fulfilled his purpose. He was sick of life. He was tired of his mom belittling him, along with the rest of the family. He felt that he amounted to nothing in school. He was a modern day male Cinderella without a fairy godmother or princess. Unhappy, Hank analyzed his options. He could not move out on his own. His parents had not allowed him to get a job, his license, or even set foot into the real world remotely. So, he was stuck in the house, but could he take it for another year until college?

He moved on to vacuuming and listened to the roar of the mighty machine. Overpowered by his thoughts, he missed several spots. Even though his mom was watching the TV, she scrutinized his cleaning. She shouted at him, "You missed a spot! Over here! Now you have to do the whole thing over again."

Barely hearing her, Hank started over, thinking about deadly chemical mixes. He

The suicide idea was sounding better and better by the minute. The only problem was that he wanted his mother to find him and not anybody else in the family.

thought of the bleach, ammonia, carpet cleaner, laundry detergent, shoe polish, Lysol, Comet, and all of the other cleaning supplies lying around the house. Then he thought of all the medicines in the cabinet: Tylenol, Advil, Imodium, Tums, allergy medication, and all the other prescription drugs. Then, there were the stairs, and the sheer drop. He knew there was a shotgun in the attic somewhere. Basically, there were plenty of options.

"What's your problem? What do you think you're doing? Why did you wind up the vacuum cord? You're not done. Go finish the first floor. You didn't vacuum the couch or chairs."

Hank was so sick of his life that he just wanted to finish his chores and hide in his room. The suicide idea was sounding better and better by the minute. The only problem was that he wanted his mother to find him and not anybody else in the family. Since she was the cause of his death, she was the one that deserved to find his body. His sisters were at a friend's house tonight and his Dad was going to be out of town until tomorrow night. Tonight was perfect.

Hank thought about what would happen if he decided to go for it. As he was vacuuming he conjured up his plan. He ran to the basement and grabbed all of the chemical bottles and placed them in his backpack. Then he raided the medicine cabinet. Loading the bag with all of the bottles and containers of drugs, he then hid in his room.

Nervous, he said a prayer. *God, please be with me as I do this and please forgive me. I know no other way. I cannot handle my life anymore. Please do not let my family feel pain over this. I just want to die. I don't want to cause problems. Please, please be with me right now. Here goes.*

Hank tried to imagine what would happen and what order he should plunge the chemicals into his body. Beginning with aspirins, he downed entire bottles using spit and a cup of water. He took a bottle of Advil using Lysol. His stomach was starting to feel full and his head was a little woozy. Fighting the urge to throw up, he moved onto the vinegar and ammonia. A chemical reaction results from the combination of the two, since one was a strong acid and one a strong base. Hank was ready. He chugged some bleach. Stinging and burning, it oozed down his trachea and scorched his stomach. About to pass out, he opened the ammonia. Spilling half of it on himself before the bottle reached his mouth, his lips, turned blue, quivered. His eyes were drooping and popping out. Hank's body began to convulse, and sweat leaked out of pores from his head down to his toes. He felt the need to throw up again, but poured the ammonia down his throat and fell over. His mom, smelling something odd, went to Hank's room to check out what was going on.

"Hank!" his mother yelled close to his ear so he could hear over the roaring of the vacuum.

Snapped back into reality, Hank realized he was standing still vacuuming the same spot on the rug that he started on. His mother looked halfway amused and halfway concerned with his daydreaming.

"Is something going on at school that you aren't telling me about?" She questioned.

"No, sorry, I was just thinking about my two tests on Friday."

"Fine. I'm going to start cooking dinner. Your father won't be home tonight. We'll eat early tonight."

"Is it ok if I go outside to play some basketball?"

"You have work to do, so only for a couple of minutes."

Hank went outside and practiced his dribbling and Jordan moves. He had one year left to try to make the team.

HOMECOMING

Lauren McClendon

My skin is sticky,
like the bed, sheets, room, air.
I keep the light off, not sure
why I'm sneaking around.
I wade through the
piles of my possessions
sprawled in front of my bed.
It's my fault for being too
busy to clean my space,
so I don't yelp when I whack
my knee on some hard edge.

The window is cracked.
I wish it would rain and
get it over with. Humidity
strangles the air.
The wind groans,
burdened by moisture. It
lifts up the fiberglass slats of my ceiling.
Noisy and eerie,
but too damn hot to close the window.

My clothing smells like
the Marlboro Menthol Lights
he smokes.
I peel off my shirt,
jeans, bra.
In the dark, I sift
through a mound of clothing,
trying to find something
that smells like me.

I heave the down comforter
onto my roommate's bed
and settle in with too much heat, too much moisture,
and the lingering smell of smoke.

NEURAL CARTOGRAPHY

Susan Duong

My body betrays me. Dendrites and axons,
pale gray spiders spinning threads of serotonin,
web beneath smooth myelin sheets.
Neural cartographers trace an invisible axis,
splitting me into hemispheres.
My tongue, divided down the center,
lists, lisps, and tingles to one side.
Numbness washes across my left cheek and hand.

Dark, cumulus shimmers cloud my vision,
words dance in silver to the left of the page.
I make a science of my disease, poring over
maps of neural pathways and exploring new dialects—
Biochemical disorder
vascular abnormalities,
aura precedes pain.

Finger by finger, the tingling stops,
silver cloud shrinks away,
tongue relaxes, words return,
and rich, red blood
gushes through open channels,
sweeping away clots, platelets.
Now the ceremony of pain begins.

Ugly tribesmen gather in my right temple,
stomping to primal rhythms;
they lure me to bed, and I
toss and turn to their music,
dancing in confused agony,
a marionette flailing about as
first one string is plucked, then another.

SEASON FOR OYSTERS

Mary Kate McCormack

Alone in her kitchen, hands dipped in oysters,
their briny liquor intoxicates fingertip flesh,
and she reaches for Tabasco, sherry, lemon to season
sea-water bodies. Reminiscent of nightmares,
they steam her eyes with music.

Turning off the stove, she picks up the rock

that sits on the windowsill above the sink, the rock
she picked up outside a church in Santa Fe. The oysters
done, she plays her favorite music,
Simon and Garfunkel, the Beatles, while wet rubber shellfish flesh
goes laughing down her throat, a saint's nightmare.
She moves for the raw ones, still in season.

She sometimes forgot to wonder if they were in season.
Young oysters veliger through trial and error until committing to rock.
Shifting sand muds their shells like nightmares
in turbid waters, while the discerning muscle of the oyster
snaps closed, cursing against claws seeking tender flesh.
Protected, they must play their own music.

Lying in their beds, maritime lullaby music
lulls shellfish to sleep, but soon to learn lessons that season
seaweed hearts, designing purple flesh.
Creeping grain of sand, tiny rock
in an excoriating search, worries oyster
deep, carving into nacre, a mother-of-pearl nightmare.

Glowing fluid seeps slow, anesthetizing the nightmare
before waking it to its own music,
surprise composition offered by oyster
with the burlap shell. Perfect pearl seasoned
with brackish thorns, abandoning the rock
for diuturnity, even as flesh

decays. The woman finishes her glass, and her young flesh
flushes pink. Reminders of nightmares
past lend sinister smiles through an orange window. She returns the rock,
Santa Fean stone to its place and hums the music,
turn, turn, turn—to everything there is a season,
and she adds to her windowsill the shell of an oyster.

'Nightmares in season' warns empty
music of withering flesh, while
oysters hold deep secrets of the Rock of Ages.



WES FRAZIER

PUTTING THE FIRE OUT

Liz Patty

When you first imagine the girl of your dreams, she's tall, thin, has short, choppy black hair and a nose ring, but when you finally meet her, she turns out to be a pitiful thing. She spends most of her days walking around your apartment barefoot, bringing you beer after beer. And then Sophia appears, and suddenly you don't know what you want anymore.

At the time, I was dating Sophia's sister, Margo. We were both twenty-five and Sophia was twenty. We didn't talk much about Sophia, but I thought I knew a lot about her. Sophia was graduating from college in about a year with a degree in art history.

Margo said, "That little girl. I can't believe she's fucking up her life like that." But she was doing better than Margo or me. I was loafing around at Radio Shack, pushing electronic organizers on upper middle class teenagers, which I couldn't imagine them really needing. And aside from bringing me beers, Margo made her money drawing tattoos at The Inkwell three days a week.

I met Sophia on her twenty-first birthday. Margo wanted to get Sophia puking drunk and laid by the end of the night. "Never drinks, never has sex. What a boring life," Margo said when she proposed the party idea to me. So, she pulled it all together in a week. After conning my roommate, Josh, into allowing the whole thing, she had James at The Inkwell find her a DJ and lured Sophia with talk of a short, small gathering as a study break. She had me and Josh invite everyone we knew.

Before Sophia even arrived, her party had managed to halfway destroy our apartment. Our kitchen floor was glazed with spilled beer and cigarette ash. Three posters—*The Exorcist*, *Gone in 60 Seconds*, and a black light poster of Jim Morrison—had been torn from the walls. My already suffering strobe light had barely been on for ten minutes when Josh sent it slamming into the wall out of anger at James from The Inkwell for grinding his cigarette into the carpet. Josh had barely breathed for yelling at people that night. Margo had laughed at him and said something about male PMS. But I think I would be mad, too, if some girl I was dancing with had puked on me.

Shortly after the destruction of my strobe light, Sophia showed up, hours late. She had black hair, like Margo, but it was long and curly. I was the first person to talk to her. "My god, you are little."

She pulled all that hair into a braid as she spoke. "Are you Margo's boyfriend?" she asked.

"Yeah, she brings me my beer."

Sophia and I sat on the blue and pink plaid sofa my Josh and I had lifted from a frat house during the late hours of a party. In front of us, Josh was finally calming down and trying to get the DJ to play *Free Falling*.

I stared at Sophia. "You know why she did this for you?"

"Do you know what I saw outside? A girl with her slinky red skirt hiked up around her waist... peeing in your yard."

She peeled layers from her fingernails. "Sure. She wanted to ruin my birthday. That's way I waited until midnight to come." She paused. "Do you know what I saw outside? A girl with her slinky red skirt hiked up around her waist," she paused to look me straight in the eye, "peeing in your yard." She laughed. "And to think...all this, for me!"

What was it about her that was so different from Margo? I mean, like I was saying, when you've thought forever that all you want is Margo and then you meet Sophia, you really have to reevaluate everything you're looking for. I was dazed.

"I want to say hi to Margo before I leave." Sophia stood and started to walk off.

I couldn't let her leave; "I know where she is," I said. I grabbed her arm and walked her back to my bedroom.

I opened my bedroom door, and there was Margo, sitting on my bed letting some guy I'd ever seen before pierce her eyebrow with a safety pin. She had her hand tight around the back of his neck, eyes closed. The guy stopped when he saw us, and Margo turned toward the door. "Sophia!" she screamed.

"I'm gone, Margo, thanks. Good luck with the piercing, my birthday was wonderful."

"Fuck no, you're not leaving." Margo stood and led Sophia and me out into the hallway. "You haven't had a drink yet, have you?" Glaring at me like it was all my fault, Margo continued. "What is it you drink again?"

"Yeah, have something to drink." I couldn't believe I hadn't asked her that already.

*Sophia looked up at me.
I wanted to roll my eyes, but I winked at her instead.*

Although Sophia kept saying she had a class in the morning, Margo had managed to pump a wine cooler and two Jell-O shots down Sophia's throat. Margo herself had had several shots and was on her second cup of beer when we stood on the patio, arguing about her new piercing. Margo had gone on and on about how she had done her nose the same way. My simple argument was that James could do it in a more sanitary manner. Sophia, who had just walked up to us, red and dripping with sweat, distracted me.

"I've never known anyone that smelled so bad," Sophia said, referring to James, who had been recruited to dance with her. "And yeah, I like long hair, but if it didn't look so...wet."

Margo turned her small chin around to me, so her head was cocked to the side. "The Inkwell is well known for sanitary *tattoos*," she said. "Anyway, it's my eyebrow." I had already forgotten.

At least an hour later, Sophia sat in an old, white plastic lawn chair across the patio and stared at my hand resting on Margo's back. Margo was having a hard time standing by herself.

While Margo and Sophia argued about how Sophia was supposed to get back to school, someone inside, probably James, yelled, "Fire in the bathtub!" excitedly.

Margo laughed and raised her fist in the air. "Burn, baby!"

Sophia looked up at me. I wanted to roll my eyes, but I winked at her instead. Then the girl of my dreams took my hand from Margo's back and clasped it in hers. We waded through the people into the bathroom, full of onlookers, and we put the fire out.

GARDEN SPIDER

McCharen Pratt

Stretched across the back
door, elastic filaments, emptied
and waiting, break against my face.
Wiping away the web, your hands
bring the spider to my face.
Knuckle-sized, its body lights
on my cheekbone like a bruise.
Spinnerets work new territory,
strange fleshy garden, as distaff
legs flit from temple to eyelid.
The back of your hand
brushes over my eyes, sweeping
the spider to the door, or dry
planks on the porch, or my hair.
A phantom strand catches
in my lashes, and I blink
and cover my eyes,
afraid of what I've caught.

JUMBLED THINKING

Natalie Hummel

Carloads gather on Sunday afternoons
at the yellow house across the street,
I watch the masses file onto the porch.
Like a cult, they congregate.
Like at a sermon, they listen
to each other,
Gospel music,
the radio.

Billy Graham's words blast from
ten-year-old speakers manifesting the AM dial
as he preaches from a nearby church.
I envision a flock of plump, perfumed ladies
herding inside with their brightly veiled hats,
while God's helpers collect money for
starving children,
missionaries,
victims of Firestone tires:

Two poor souls in Texas, recalled to answer
to the insurance salesman in the sky.
The devil smiled that day for sure.
He often does during Texan summers,
breathing hot breath onto oil-laden planes.

Sometimes I hear his searing speech in my head
when he sits upon my left shoulder.
On the right sits my guardian cat angel.
It loudly purrs righteousness into my ear
while the sunlight reflects off its halo.

The light hits my eyes and I wince, waking me
from my thoughts in time to catch the
the news from the radio across the street:
Billy Graham's local appearance,
followed by more on Firestone tires
and a story on Buddy, a heroic cat.

TO MY MOTHER AT A FUNERAL

George Royer

I once planted raspberries in a humid garden.
I watched them slowly reach skyward,
making a season of their desire.

I wondered if the children
would listen to my footsteps in the hallway.
Reaching for me, their hands oily and serpentine
with the sweat of his grave.

I hid because I could not tell my schoolmates
that little Patrick died in the lake
or how his younger sister cried
when she was made to understand.

I remember the black dress on Patrick's mother,
the beads of sweat mingling with her tears
at a summer funeral.
That was the day I was made to understand that
my first love was for you, mother,
and it is deep like that lake.

ELDERLY COUPLE IN A DOWNTOWN RESTAURANT

Margaret Mrozcek

They sit across from each other
As wordless as a pair of gargoyles
Cloaked in patterns of faded polyester
With rough cement heels anchored
Between polished table legs.

One and a half centuries
Half asleep in two parlor chairs,
Posed like drooping willows
In a table top still-life of
Napkins, containers, spice jars...

Two relics placed facing one another,
With a bowl of salad to mediate the
Unbroken silence. Their hands echo
Bone as each one prods leaves
With slender stainless steel.

A delicate pair of paper doves
Crinkling under the moonlight
Of a gaudy neon beer sign
Seem out of place in this world
Where everything has to be heard.

I'M LOST

James Griffin

God has given me one extraordinary vision. I don't mean, of course, that every waking moment, every canyon or ocean or jungle or beautiful waterfall, or whatever, isn't a miracle. I'm only saying that I believe there is one crystal clear moment, one clean perfect instant that he reveals to every person. I suppose it's his gift to us. I had my moment when I was twelve. My Daddy August had been working out in the fields all day, as he did every day. I had to walk home from school because the bus system, at that time, didn't pick up where I lived. And Daddy certainly didn't have time to drive all the way into Lansville for my sake. Mom used to drive me in on the old flatbed, but Mom died long before this so she don't pertain to my story, I guess.

I can feel that wind still, like a warm breath on the back of your neck, making the hair stand at attention. And the sky, my word, the sky. I think if God has eyes his would be that blue. I've seen pictures of the South Pacific in magazines and that water somewhat approximates this sky. So fragile that it might break if you look too hard at it. Sometimes I thought if I looked hard enough at it, I could look through some

kinda ghost world. That Nebraska sky was the reason I didn't mind walking the nine miles home each day. Those walks, past acres of corn, past the silos and the barns, were my time to just think. I used to know how many steps it was from school to the edge of town, where the sidewalk merged into broken asphalt, then into gravel.

On this day I was about a mile from the farm. It was near the Tanner's property, I believe. As usual my mind was wandering, swimming about five miles off the ground in that ocean sky. That afternoon I was thinking about a movie that I had seen in town over the weekend. I remember a flying monster being involved. Oh yeah, and radiation. Then, as I was staring up at a giant nimbus up

to my right I saw it. On the edge of the cloud coming down, not necessarily flying or hovering, it was a peaceful movement like a kite or blimp might make. First thing I noticed were his wings, his giant, grand wings. At this point I stopped walking and kicked up a cloud of dust around my feet. The late afternoon sun was behind him, backlighting him into a silhouette and coloring the tops of the corn stalks a shade of fire. I'd say those old church paintings of angels had the right idea but there really is no color of paint that could do this justice. He swooped down and stopped, hovering about five feet off the top of the corn. The sun was in my eyes but I could make him out quite well. He was that close. He didn't have a particular color, kinda like a motor oil slick on the surface of a puddle, rotating color. All colors. He was not smiling, though. He looked so utterly sad that I could feel my heart breaking for him. But his face was so beautiful that I'm finding it hard even now to put it into words. It made me want to never close my eyes for the rest of my life. Or have my eyes removed because I knew I would never see anything so perfect as long as I was alive. I can only

remember hearing two words before blacking out.

“I’m lost.”

Then it felt as if all the breath and all the blood in my veins had been sucked out of me, like squeezing water from a sponge. I collapsed. I entered a sleep so deep and black that the surface seemed so far above me I thought I would never come up for air. But eventually I came to in my bedroom at home on the farm, with Daddy August standing over me. I remember smelling the motor oil from his overalls because he was so close to me. The room was dark and I’m pretty positive I heard my Daddy August crying. But I had never felt so pleased in my life.

“Boy...boy! Oh, thank the Lord. I thought I’d lost you. I thought I’d lost you.” He kept repeating that as he grabbed me and pressed my face into his chest, his strong motor oil chest.

